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Maysan Officials travel to Tallil to talk about projects with USACE, PRT

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TALLIL, Iraq – A delegation of officials from Maysan Province traveled recently to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers headquarters for southern Iraq to discuss the value of potential reconstruction projects and the need for coordination between Maysan officials and personnel from the Corps and the Provincial Reconstruction Team for Maysan.

Darrell Jenks, leader of the Maysan PRT, said he has dreamed of being able to visit Maysan. "Come to Maysan, you will find Maysan safe," a provincial official assured Jenks and the other Americans present.

Jenks, a career diplomat with 28 years experience, said the PRT is working very hard to help the people of Maysan. He voiced hope that the meeting would allow key players from the U.S. and Maysan to get to know each other and facilitate the construction by the Corps of Engineers of a surgical hospital in Maysan's capital of Amarah.

The Maysan delegation, whose members included representatives of the governor, the police, army, and provincial council, spoke of safety, security and stability in their province. They acknowledged some tribal feuding and limited criminal activity, but strenuously rejected the notion of significant major threats there.

They said Maysan is rich with oil resources but suffers from poverty. They indicated repeatedly that they are anxious to cooperate with Americans who want to build projects for Maysan. "We give assur-

ance for the safety of anyone who visits," one official said. "We will cooperate."

Located in southern Iraq and bordering on Iran, Maysan long has been known as inhospitable-to-hostile for outsiders seeking to exert control there. It was a source of irritation and rebellion during the reign of Saddam Hussein. Following the 2003 invasion, the British were responsible for Maysan. But their presence there receded and the province for some time has been known as a place resistant to Coalition forces and elements such as Corps of Engineers reconstruction staff and PRT personnel.

Col. Steve Hill, commander of the USACE Gulf Region South district, told the Maysanis he was honored and privileged to be able to meet them. He thanked them for visiting Tallil and complimented them on their efforts "to bring us together." However, he said their version of the situation in Maysan regarding security and project access was "somewhat different from what I've been told by others." He said part of his job is to decide how to use very limited resources in the nine southern provinces of Iraq.

"When you come to Maysan, you'll find peace," a Maysan official promised.

Col. Hill said he had to decide several months ago whether to proceed with the hospital project in Maysan. He said there was some pressure not to do the hospital project because of concerns about security and access to the project. But he said that "Dr. Jenks told me we must do the hospi-

tal and we have committed to do the hospital." The project will entail the construction of a 100-bed surgical hospital at an estimated cost of \$12.7 million.

The Maysanis also made it clear the hospital was pivotal in their thinking. They reported a meeting with various tribal and religious and political elements where it was agreed that Maysan would cooperate with the GRS and PRT on the hospital and other projects.

A state department security officer asked a number of specific questions about such matters as contact information, access to project sites, and security issues. A Maysan official said, "We want to open our door in Maysan." He said the people of Maysan "got fed up with troubles and want more projects," including the hospital. He said the people of Maysan suffered much under Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athists and need help.

"I'm most impressed," said PRT leader Jenks. His assistant team leader, Don Brown, said both sides share the objective of helping the Maysani people. But Brown cited the possibility that dissident elements in Maysan could try to cause trouble. He was assured by a provincial official that "the people of Maysan got fed up with conflict and are ready to cooperate with you."

"Please remove all the fears you had," the Maysani added.

This official later said, amid a discussion of details regarding any visits and related security concerns, "The important thing for us is the project; ask us and we will do it."

Col. Hill noted there are currently some key Corps of Engineers projects in progress in Maysan, including a 400 kV power plant in Amarah. A Maysan official said he is aware of such projects, but stressed the importance to the province of the hospital project.

Col Hill said work on the hospital could begin in February if everything proceeds smoothly. He said the project could be completed by the summer of 2009, saying again such a timetable assumes that everything proceeds smoothly.

"We have committed to the hospital," Jenks said.

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